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April 1, 1996

HAK on McGeorge Bundy, 1970

[part of conversation with Kissinger at San Clemente, August 1969]

I asked him if he had a copy of the McNamara Study on Vietnam at the NSC. He said he did. He asked if I thought he should look at it. I said yes, definitely. At least, he should read the summaries, and have someone on his staff read the whole thing and pick out parts for him to read. The summaries of each volume were two or three pages, less than 200 pages in all. They wouldn't take him too long.

He asked, "Do you really think we have anything to learn from that?"

My heart sank. Nothing ever changed in that office. That was the message of the McNamara Study, and in fact that it was why it was urgent to read them.

I said yes, I really did. It was still very relevant history.

He said, "But you know, we make policy very differently now."

I threw away tact. "Cambodia didn't look all that different."

Kissinger hesitated, then said, "You must understand, Cambodia was undertaken for very complicated reasons."

With the same lack of tact, I was not looking to be a White House consultant beyond this meeting, I said, "Henry, there hasn't been a rotten decision on Vietnam in the last ten years that wasn't undertaken for very complicated reasons."

I was thinking, they were usually pretty much the same reasons though the people in charge didn't know it. Which was why it was so important for one of them finally to read these histories.

[Domestic politics, in this case Nixon's retort to the Senate for turning down his appointments of Haynesworth and Carswell to the Court, signalling to both allies and adversaries Presidential determination and willingness to carry out secret threats of escalation, compensating for past failures to take even stronger action, affecting the situation on the ground, strengthening the credibility of threats and promises of still further escalation. I guessed these were among the reasons he had in mind without wanting to acknowledge any of them. The analyses in the McNamara Study showed clearly that it was a list that would have been familiar to McGeorge Bundy and Walt Rostow, Kissinger's ex-

Cambridge predecessors in office, in connection with such brilliant policy initiatives as the coup against Diem, covert operations against North Vietnam, the Tonkin Gulf "reprisals," the Rolling Thunder bombing campaign, all of which bore comparison, in retrospect, with the cleverness of the invasion of Cambodia.]

"The people who came down from Cambridge to tell us what we should be doing [a group led by Tom Schelling of Harvard, who resigned their consultancies over Cambodia] knew nothing of policy-making," Kissinger said. "They never had the clearances."

After a pause, I said, "I had the clearances."

"I know that. I am not speaking of you."

"And Bundy and Rostow had all the clearances, but their decisions weren't any better."

Kissinger said: "Walt Rostow is a fool."

"That may be true," I said. "But McGeorge Bundy is no fool."

"No, he is not a fool," Kissinger said. "But McGeorge Bundy has no sense of policy."